BEST PRACTICES
for
FAMILY INVOLVEMENT
in
COMPREHENSIVE SYSTEM of
PERSONNEL DEVELOPMENT
(CSPD)

developed by

CSPD Goals 2000 Family Involvement Committee

DELAINE EASTIN
State Superintendent of Public Instruction

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Welcome.....

I am excited to be here and a part of this very important training. The purpose of these meetings is to orient you to a newly developed booklet entitled, "Best Practices for Family Involvement in the Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD).

This nicely formatted resource guide will assist you in developing and nurturing family/school involvement which is so vital and critical in meeting the needs of our children with disabilities.

I want to thank each and every one of you who contributed the time and effort in preparing this very useful resource guide for the Regional Cluster meetings which will train the family involvement facilitators.

Dr. Alice D. Parker
CA State Director of Special Education

California State Department of Education,
Special Education Division
Comprehensive System of Personnel Developments Advisory Committee

Best Practices for Family Involvement in Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD)

Developed by:

CSPD Goals 2000 Family Involvement Committee

Prepared by:

Fran-Arner Costello* - Co-Chair
Coordinator, Ventura County Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA)
Joan M. Tellefsen* - Co-Chair
Executive Director, Team of Advocates for Special Kids a Parent Training Information Center (PTI)
Marta Anchondo*, Deputy Director
Team of Advocates for Special Kids a Parent Training Information Center (PTI)
Bobbie Coulbourne*, Advocate and Trainer
Exceptional Families Unlimited a Parent Training Information Center (PTI)
Dana Griggs, Assistant Director of Staff Development
Ontario-Montclair School District
Jean Hansen*, Parent Representative
CSPDAC
Virginia Reynolds, Project Director CEI/TAN
CEI/TAN
Brenda Smith*, Advocate and Trainer
Team of Advocates for Special Kids a Parent Training Information Center (PTI)

Edited by:

Teresa M. Correa*, General Education Parent Representative
School District Employee
Juno Duenas*, Executive Director
Early Start Family Resource Centers and
Support for Families of Children with Disabilities (PTI)
Deidre Hayden, Executive Director
MATRIX (PTI)

* Parent of a child with a disability.

Best Practices For Family Involvement in Comprehensive System of Personnel Develoment (CSPD)

Section 1. Introduction

"Best Practices for Family Involvement in CSPD" is a resource for all members of Regional Coordinating Councils, SELPAs, CACs, parent groups and other entities involved in working with families. This document assists in the development of best practices for pervasive and lasting systems change in family-professional collaboration in our state.

In this booklet when the term "families" is used it may refer to any combination of individuals supporting the person with disabilities. It is not limited to the traditional concept of a family but may include any non-traditional family group.

The philosophy of this publication is based on the knowledge that involving families productively is more likely to result in a positive outcome for students. In addition, family involvement provides a positive, collaborative win-win environment for all stakeholders. This is true for students in both special and general education.

The purpose of "Best Practices for Family Involvement in CSPD" is to enable families, care givers and individuals with disabilities to become active participants in all state, regional, and local entities that plan and implement in-service and pre-service personnel development activities related to individuals with disabilities. It also provides strategies for networking with each other and with professionals.

In 1997 the Family Involvement in Personnel Development Activities Survey was distributed to Regional Coordinating Council members, such as SELPAs, LEAs, Regional Centers, Family Resource Centers, and parent groups. The purpose of the survey was to provide information about methods these organizations use to include family members as active participants in various aspects of personnel development. "Best Practices for Family Involvement in CSPD" is based on the results of this survey.

Recent federal laws and requests for proposals for grant awards require parent involvement in all aspects of education, from planning to implementation. "Best Practices for Family Involvement in CSPD" provides a creative plan for carrying out systems change into the future.

Section 2. Systemic Involvement

A. Areas of Systemic Involvement:

Meeting the spirit of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), systemic involvement of families is required in the areas of training, program development, policy making, evaluation, and leadership development.

B. Value Statement:

When successful systemic involvement of families occurs, the system becomes responsive to the needs of families, including the families' linguistic and socioeconomic status, resulting in more collaborative

family involvement. This will generate success for the student, respectful working relationships with the family, and increased family satisfaction with the system. Finally, the system that includes families increases its knowledge base of students' needs and its capacity to serve them.

C. Written Policies and Bylaws:

Entities must have written policies and bylaws mandating family involvement at all levels. (See Appendix I.) Careful consideration needs to be given to the composition of various committees, and the appropriate amount of family involvement.

For Example:

- o The CAC require more than 50% parents
- o A group organized to support parents should be composed primarily of parents
- o Other Committees or Task Forces, depending on their size and focus, may require only one or two parents

Written policies and bylaws may include resources and strategies for:

- o Providing readily available information and materials, written in a way understandable to people coming from "outside the system" (See Appendix II.)
- o Validating and accommodating attendance (stipends, qualified interpreters, child care, transportation, mileage) (See Appendices III and IV.)

It can be beneficial to meet with parent attendees prior to an event to orient and/or mentor them in order that they be active participants in the event.

Families must know that your staff respect and appreciate their time, input and involvement.

D. Range and Description of Possibilities for Involvement:

Program Development
There are many possibilities for family involvement, such as participation on curriculum committees, grant writing teams, school reform efforts, new program committees, Parent Teacher Student Associations, School Site Councils, Title I program committees and bilingual/bicultural committees.

Policy Making
Parent involvement is also necessary on local school boards, Community Advisory Committees, Agency Boards -- both local, regional, state and federal local plan review committees, budget committees, and personnel hiring panels. (See Appendix V),

Evaluation
To evaluate family satisfaction with the system, program efficacy, and student outcomes, regular assessments should be conducted, and evaluation forms provided at each event. If an evaluation committee is formed, families should be included. (See AppendixVI.)

<u>Leadership Development</u>
Families, as well as professionals, need to be trained as experts and leaders. This can be done by reaching out to other parents for involvement, by encouraging them to chair or lead committees, and by encouraging and training them to present or co-present.

E. Instilling the Willingness:

In order to achieve the willingness of staff to work with families, strategies must be developed to inculcate <u>values</u> of parent involvement. This can be accomplished by having parents and professionals jointly share problem solving and success stories, and by providing research data about family involvement to your staff (See Appendix VII.)

Discussions with professionals should include the correlation between family involvement and the amount of services requested by families; their satisfaction with services; and the positive working relationships that can be developed.

The data should indicate the numbers of fair hearings and complaints that are filed when families are included as equal collaborators versus when they are not. It should also indicate the spirit of reciprocity and give and take which may result.

Additional methods for instilling willingness in staff are:
- o Teaching conflict resolution strategies to both families and professionals
- o Encourage and reward teams that include parents and professionals
- o Getting families to recognize professionals who are collaborative and supportive (See Appendix VIII.)
- o Getting families to write thank you letters
- o Getting families who are happy with their program to speak out about their successes (See Appendix IX.)

F. Networks of Support:

Families should be given ample opportunity to network with other families at all levels. This may be accomplished by connecting families with appropriate support groups, making referrals to other appropriate resources -- national, regional, state and local, and providing written newsletters and materials. (See Appendix X.)

G. Building Skills of Families to Become Effective, Collaborative Team Members:

The most effective collaborative team members are those that are able to see the "big picture". Collaborative team members have the following strengths:
- o Ability to represent their own experiences, but also to move forward and look beyond
- o Knowledge about the issues, system, (whatever is being addressed)
- o Ability to participate in consensus building
- o Recognize courtesies -- letting others be heard, not repeating yourself, adhering to an agenda
- o Not assuming that our experiences are everyone's
- o Recognize positive as well as negative experiences

(See Appendix XI.)

Section 3. Training for Families

A. Assessing Training Needs of Families:

Assessing needs of families for training should be done in a thoughtful, careful way that addresses the needs of your overall constituency. Needs Assessments can be written or oral, and can be done with individuals or whole groups. You may choose to do a sampling of your constituency, or assess the needs of all. Whenever assessing training needs of families, you must take into consideration the cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic aspects of your population, as well as the variety of family structures.

For example, some individuals may prefer to work with a large group of people in brainstorming responses to questions together. Others may prefer to work alone, at their leisure, perhaps with other family members filling out a written form. Always remember specific language needs. This may require putting written materials into a variety of languages or using oral interpreters for groups. In addition, you may need to simplify your materials to accommodate a variety of learning styles and/or educational levels. (Follow up questions may be required to insure that you understand what they truly mean to say.)

Socioeconomic factors may also need to be considered. For example, single parent families may not be able to participate in meetings, but could respond to a written or telephone survey at home. Because the cost of envelopes and/or postage may be a barrier for some, the inclusion of a stamped return envelope may be necessary. Child care and transportation issues always need to be taken into consideration. Please use caution at all times when interpreting responses from families to make sure that the accurate meaning is conveyed.

It is important to remember that respondents to surveys often need follow up reminders. Phone calls and follow up letters should be planned into your process to insure a relevant response. Many families of people with disabilities are dealing with crises on a regular basis and may need reminders to respond to your survey.

The frequency of conducting needs assessments should be determined by your group. Many organizations assess on a yearly basis; others may do it less often with brief "probes" in the interim. It is important that needs assessments be conducted often enough to accurately reflect the current needs of families.

In a recent survey conducted in the state of California for organizations which provide support and training for personnel working with families of special education students, 52 organizations noted that parents were their primary target audience. Of these, three use a verbal method and 40 use a written method of assessing training needs. Other methods noted for assessing families' training needs include peer support, dialogue, committees, workshop evaluation forms which ask for other areas of need, and attendance at seminars and conferences. (See Appendix XII.)

B. Event Planning:

It is critical that parents and family members be included in planning and developing your event. This provides buy-in and perspective that is critical. Most important, of course, is that the topic is relevant to your audience. Utilizing your Needs Assessment will increase the likelihood that the topic will be of interest and value. The format should be non-threatening to families and presented clearly to insure understanding. Care should be given to provide a warm and welcoming environment with signs, decorations, food and materials that are friendly and easy to understand.

The presentation should be focused toward the needs of families. Families may come to your event overwhelmed with many concerns about other issues, and you must make sure that the activity you are presenting feels pertinent to them and gains their attention.

If presenting to a small group, flexibility should be planned so that the agenda can be changed (or thrown out) if there are better ways to meet the needs of the group. Adequate time should be provided in the presentation for questions from the participants.

In any size group, you might have a staff member assigned to address individual concerns of participants that are different than the agenda. Strategies may be for the staff person to deal with the issue immediately, outside the room, or to explain to the participant that staff will deal with it at a later time.

Advertisement materials should be clear, understandable and welcoming. Of course, appropriate languages must be addressed. Information should be complete, with phone numbers provided for questions. Persons fielding phone calls should be able to respond in the languages that people may speak.

Having a registration form "tear-off" is one way to determine the attendance that you may have, as well as help you with reminder phone calls. Some organizations have found that charging a small stipend actually encourages people to attend the events for which they have enrolled. One strategy is to consider the stipend a "deposit" that is refundable upon attendance (or turning in evaluation). However, it is important that a registration fee never be a barrier for families, so a scholarship option should always be provided.

Methods of outreach need to be pursued. In addition to flyers and mailings, you may place articles in community newspapers, libraries, supermarkets, church newsletters, etc. In addition, Public Service Announcements (PSAs) may be placed on the radio in a variety of languages that you serve. Advertisement through the schools may be accomplished by teachers who send them home, school newsletters, distribution in school offices and/or PTSA representatives.

Follow up is an effective way to get a good turnout. Personal phone calls are found to be extremely effective, especially within a few days of the event. Leaders of disability groups and parent support groups can be solicited to implement "telephone trees" and other methods to get the word out. Follow up notes or letters to people who have expressed an interest or who have registered can be effective.

SELPAs may ask CAC members to do the outreach and follow up within their districts and communities.

C. Issues in Providing Training for Families:

1. Time/Location:

When planning and coordinating trainings for families, it can be a challenge to determine times that will be most convenient for your audience. Some families prefer mornings when their children are in school, others prefer evenings because of their own work and child care needs, and others prefer weekends. Your Needs Assessment should ask about most likely times for training to meet the needs of your families.

Location is also an important consideration. People are most likely to attend an event that is held at a location familiar to them within the community. Local schools are often a good location with which families are familiar. Of course, closeness and accessibility are important. If you serve a large geographical area, consider offering your event in a variety of locations. Site accessibility for people with physical limitations is an important consideration.

A rule of thumb may be to offer trainings at a variety of times and places, and see which are most popular for your audiences. Keep trying different times and locations, remembering that no one time and location will ever meet the needs of everyone! Individual outreach is an effective method to encourage families to attend events, and to determine the scheduling and other constraints they may be facing.

2. Child Care:

Child care is always an important issue when training families, particularly so with families of children with special needs. Often families are not able to get out of the home without support for their child care needs. Who provides (and pays for) child care can be a concern. In some instances, participating SELPAs have agreed to donate instructional aide time to cover child care at events. Other organizations maintain a "pool" of trained child care providers. For children with disabilities, extra staffing and training may be necessary.

Liability about child care should be a concern. Check with your insurance carrier to see if coverage for liability for child care can be added.

In addition, some children require specialized nursing or other support due to intensive medical needs. It may be more appropriate to provide stipends to families of these children to pay for their own trained providers in the home. Stipends to families to procure their own child care is an alternative to providing child care on-site. This is an advantage to families who have child care available, but may be a disadvantage to those who do not. This is usually a more costly alternative than providing on-site care, but may be easier in the long run. It may be appropriate to offer both options.

Respite hours from Regional Center may be utilized by some families for whom it is authorized. Additionally, some local organizations that specialize in children with disabilities may have staff who are trained to work with and provide child care to individuals with special needs.

3. Transportation:

It is important to consider the transportation needs of families. Depending on the location of the workshop, you may need to provide transportation (i.e., vans, buses) or coordinate transportation among the families attending. If it is within walking distance of the community, walking may be an option, as may be public transportation. In these cases, the timing of your event would be important and you would probably want to avoid late evening times.

Stipends for mileage can be given for families who drive to the event. This may be an option for families for whom the cost is a barrier, or as a method of letting families know that their attendance is valuable to you. Some Regional Centers will provide vouchers to families for taxi and/or bus. Car pools can be effective.

4. Food:

Providing food is a way of setting a tone at your event that is warm and makes people feel welcome. It is important to have a budget for food, but it is also a good idea to involve the attendees themselves in bringing food. This helps people to feel needed and involved, and is considered important in some cultures. Families who have difficulty with purchasing food items may be encouraged to provide a decoration such as a tablecloth or candle, as a way of encouraging their involvement. Items that are culturally appropriate are especially effective.

Simple snacks are usually appreciated. If you provide a meal, consideration should be given as to the appropriateness of expenditure of public funds. Local businesses may be approached for donation of food items for your event.

5. Language:

You must make sure that your materials and verbal information are given in languages that reflect your audience. Interpreters should be trained and consideration given to the variety of dialects within a particular language that parents may use.

Language interpretation may be provided in a variety of ways. One method is simply having a person sit next to the person needing interpretation and speak quietly to them. This can be distracting to others in the room and difficult for the recipient. Another way is to use microphone and headsets. This is a preferred method because the people needing interpretation can sit anywhere they choose in the room and still receive the interpretation, with minimal disruption to others. A disadvantage is that the interpreter is "one step behind" the English speaker and it can be hard to keep up. (See Appendix XIII.)

The most effective method is to provide a speaker who can give the presentation directly in that language. This may require you to have more than one presentation in separate rooms. It may be a barrier to find a speaker in the second language who is qualified to present the topic as your primary speaker.

It is also necessary to have all your written materials in the languages that will be presented. A problem can occur with visual materials such as overheads and slides. It would be optimal to have overheads in

both languages, but another idea is to have the interpreter copy the overheads onto flip charts in the second language prior to the event.

Interpretation for people with hearing impairments is another important consideration. Properly trained sign language interpreters must be provided as needed. The person with hearing impairments may have an interpreter that they prefer to use, or a particular style of interpretation that they require. Sometimes the person with hearing impairments will even assist in arranging for the interpreter, if financial considerations are addressed. For lengthy events, plan on having multiple interpreters to accommodate their needs for breaks. If you have more than one simultaneous session, you will need to determine which session the people with hearing impairments are attending so that you can adequately meet their needs.

Another method of providing interpretation for people with hearing impairments is using a large screen computer display. There are companies that will provide this service to organizations (See Appendix XIV.)

Another consideration is the provision of written materials in large print or Braille for people with visual disabilities.

It is necessary to have your audience communicate their needs for interpretation to you early enough so that it can be provided. A rule of thumb is to ask for at least ten days advance notice. Information about necessary accommodations should be included with registration forms.

D. Presentation:

When there is a parent and professional team presenting, the parent and professional should be involved together in developing the workshop, rather than the parent being "given" their assigned part. Any presentations for families should always be jargon-free, or an adequate explanation of jargon given if it is necessary to use it. This includes acronyms! A good strategy is to encourage the audience to feel free to ask for an explanation at any time that jargon, acronyms, or words are used that are not clear. Consider appointing several audience members as "jargon police" to ask for clarification.

Parents' personal stories are almost always helpful and interesting, but they need to be short and to the point. It is important to reflect the story, but to also emphasize the positive outcomes from which others can learn. If possible, help all parties to understand that negotiation is part of life and is not always a negative thing. Learning to advocate for children in ways that are positive and non-threatening is an important skill for all.

It is important to provide training for parents as well as professionals in professional presentation skills. For example, all presenters should have strategies for dealing with "problem" participants, deferring questions until another time, handling time constraints, using ground rules, etc. When parents and professionals present together, they should respect and support each other during the presentation. They should communicate clearly and honestly with each other before the presentation as to each other's perspectives, and make sure that each is comfortable with the other's viewpoint. During the presentation, they should be supportive of each other, assisting each other with "sticky" situations as needed. If either presenter disagrees with the other, it should be communicated privately, not publicly. However, it is okay to disagree on some viewpoints, as long as it is courteous and upholds the credibility of both presenters.

Some parents need to be encouraged to do presenting and facilitating. Group leaders should encourage parents to develop and use their skills as appropriate. Some parents will be comfortable speaking in small groups and many are happy to "tell" their child's story. Encouraging parents and family members to become presenters about outcomes that are positive helps them to become better advocates for their children and contributors to "the system."

All presenters, parents or professionals, must remember that they do not have to know the answer to EVERYTHING. It is always okay to admit you do not know, defer the question to your co-presenter, ask for ideas from the audience, or promise to get back to them with the answer at a later date. It is also a good idea to encourage families to look for resources and information to answer their questions on their own. This gives parents responsibility and reaps much more information for them in the long run. If you promise to look up information for someone, however, make sure that you write it down and that you do get the information back to the person that requested it. (See Appendix XV.)

E. Evaluation:

Parent evaluation of training events can take as many different forms as does your Needs Assessment. It can be written, oral, word-of-mouth, etc. Of course, your relevant languages must be addressed. Evaluation of specific events and activities should be conducted as well as evaluation of your overall training program.

Assistance in completing evaluations should be provided as needed, in tactful ways. Sometimes an incentive is required to get the evaluation from the respondents. Examples may be raffle tickets, candy, or other desired printed materials.

Use the evaluation results from your audiences in meaningful ways. Evaluation forms should be used as a tool to evaluate whether or not you met the audience's needs for information and training. There will always be differences of opinion in audiences, but presenters should look for commonalties in perceptions and adjust as appropriate. Many organizations need the evaluations and sign in sheets in order to meet their legal and funding requirements. Further, your evaluations should serve as a tool to determine further training needs. (See Appendix XVI.)

Section 4. Training for Professionals

All pre-service training for professionals who will be involved with children and young people with disabilities should include training in the value of family/professional collaboration. Research indicates that when professionals value and solicit collaboration with families, better outcomes for children are the result. Professionals who include families at all levels of decision making and programming create an environment in which families are able to focus their passion, diffuse their anger, and focus on positive solutions for children. In addition, families feel "listened to" and that their opinions are valued.

Professionals should be given strategies for informal mediation and alternative dispute resolution to assist families and professionals to resolve conflicts in respectful and collaborative ways. Professionals also need to be given strategies to be culturally sensitive to the needs of families with whom they may collaborate.

All professionals should be trained in ways to empower families to be part of the system at all levels. Professionals should embrace the values of welcoming parents, and validating and accommodating their attendance at various activities, committees, etc. They should have skills and strategies to work with family members who are "new" to committees and working groups, by providing information in user-friendly ways, or serving as a "mentor" to the person who is new.

Professionals should value the input of the family and be responsive to the input at all levels, from individual child-specific programming decisions up to system wide decisions. In addition, professionals who will be involved in leadership and presentation roles should be skilled at including and collaborating with family members as co-leaders and co-presenters.

A. Categories of Family and Professional Collaboration:

Professionals who will be involved in the education and training of children and young people with disabilities should be trained in the following categories of family and professional collaboration:

1. Teacher-to-Parent:

Teachers should value and have strategies for regular communication with families about the child and the day to day activities of the classroom and the school. This may include regular phone calls or notes. If phoning is the preferred method, families and teachers should communicate as to the most appropriate times to call. Parents should be welcomed to the school on an individual basis, according to district policy regarding parent visitations. Whenever possible, parents should be welcomed and encouraged to volunteer in the classroom and be part of the daily school program. Strategies should be given to teachers to make parents feel welcome at school meetings, including the provision of a clear agenda, food, child care, and language accommodations to meet the needs of families.

Teachers and parents should be in regular contact about the child's progress, particularly at the time of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meeting. The law requires that parents of children with disabilities are informed of progress toward goals at least as often as parents of children without disabilities are informed of their children's progress. A best practice is that the parent and teacher meet informally prior to the IEP, to share what will be discussed, including any input the parent may want to share. Parents should be encouraged to share any ideas they may have regarding goals and objectives, transition needs and services, program accomodations and supports, etc. This not only creates a warm and collaborative atmosphere, but usually saves a great deal of time at the IEP. Professionals should be encouraged to welcome meetings with families at any time between IEPs, if appropriate.

2. Committee-Level:

Whenever family members are included on committees, it is imperative that professionals be trained in strategies for welcoming by introducing everyone and their role. In addition, they should provide background information and a brief summary of what has been accomplished so far so that the person who is new feels more knowledgable and/or comfortable. Use of acronyms should be minimized, but any acronyms that are used should be fully clarified as often as needed. A written explanation of acronym definitions should be used whenever possible.

When family members are invited to sit on committees and task forces, professionals should know to provide materials and information to families to assist them in becoming active, involved members of the group. This may require providing printed materials in different languages, and compiling information in ways that are easy to assimilate. When appropriate, committee members who already are serving on the committee should volunteer to be "mentors" to the person who is new, providing background, clarification, etc., as appropriate, before, during and after the meeting.

If the family member is willing, they should be given an active role to play in the group, including leadership, support or follow-up tasks. Finally, the most important way that families can be made to feel welcome is when their input is acted upon. This means that ideas and opinions that are shared should be responded to thoughtfully and implemented when appropriate.

3. Parent-Parent Communication:

Professionals should be adequately trained in methods for communication with parents in ways that are family-friendly. In communications between home and school, professionals should use a warm, informal, understandable writing style. Again, if any jargon is used in the correspondence, it should be fully defined.

Some parents prefer to communicate by e-mail, fax and other methods if the technology is available. Communication may be necessary in large print or Braille for parents with visual impairments. Clearly, all communication must always be provided in the language that is spoken by the parents. Families should be encouraged in written communications to respond in writing or to call back if desired, ensuring a two-way flow of communication between home and school.

4. Newsletters:

Newsletters and information sheets are another way to instill communication between home and school. Professionals should be trained to develop interesting and meaningful documents for families to keep them apprised of activities at school (See Appendix XVII.) Many of the strategies described in the previous section regarding understandable language, use of jargon, etc., should be applied.

5. Training With Parents:

In pre-service and in-service training, professionals should be given strategies for co-leading or co-presenting with family members. Much of these strategies have been covered in Section Three, including planning, presenting, and handling disagreements which may arise. Professionals should learn the value of including parents as co-presenters in presentations, in order to increase the interest, credibility and applicability of the information presented.

B. Methods:

Methods for training professionals in strategies for family and professional collaboration may include the following:

1. Pre-service:

Colleges and universities that train professionals in the field of disabilities should include mandatory course work and demonstration of competency in the area of family and professional collaboration and partnership. This would include training for educational professionals including teachers, specialists, and administrators. Agency personnel such as social workers, therapists, case managers and counselors should also have these required competencies. Medical professionals should be trained in these strategies as well.

2. In-Service:

In addition to pre-service level training, in-service training should also focus on the development or improvement of the skills of professionals in family and professional collaboration. In-service activities should be targeted toward all professionals and volunteers. Instruction should be specifically focused toward increasing or improving skills and abilities to work with the local population and any particular needs that they may have.

3. Using Parents as Trainers of Professionals:

Whenever possible, parents and family members should be included in planning and presenting the per-service and in-service programs that are provided to professionals on this topic. The parent perspective provides useful insight to professionals to assist them in development of their skills. (See Appendix XVII.)